



# Mythconceptions: A reality check on e-books from the publisher's POV, Part I

by Danny O. Snow

In late 2009, the long anticipated migration of periodicals from print to Web is undeniably underway. Major daily newspapers including the *Christian Science Monitor* are already replacing unprofitable (and environmentally unfriendly) print editions with leaner, greener, more timely online distribution. As much as newsprint is a beloved institution, most informed observers agree that the transition from paper-n-ink to bits-n-bytes for newspapers and magazines makes good sense in today's world—and certainly in tomorrow's. It's a better match between form and content.

In the book world, too, the word on the street these days is e-books, e-books, and more e-books. The scuttlebutt among book publishers is that they must rapidly jump on the e-book bandwagon, or risk getting left in the dust. Having observed how record labels were blindsided by music downloading over the last decade, most book publishers are taking this risk seriously.

One motive for publishers to embrace e-books is that sales are growing exponentially. "Convert from print to digital distribution," they hear, "and tap a booming new market while earning as much per copy as you did with tree-books...maybe more!"

But early adopters are now learning that this widely circulated notion may be overstated for the moment, as reported below.

Likewise, book publishers are told that the emerging e-book industry standard EPUB format is a kind of silver bullet. "Convert your production files from PDF to EPUB," they hear, "and your books will almost magically become marketable for reading on nearly every conceivable electronic device from the Kindle to the iPhone, and everything in between!" Like the misconception that e-books are rapidly supplanting tree-books in the marketplace, in 2009 the full promise of EPUB is still unrealized.

This report, without denying that the time has definitely come for book publishers to take e-books seriously, will debunk some of the more prevalent myths about e-books under current market conditions and technological realities.

## *Mythprint #1: E-books will soon overtake tree-books in the marketplace*

Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* was released simultaneously as an e-book and a tree-book on September 14, 2009. Many industry observers predicted

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## Additional E-Book Resources

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### Digital Asset Distributors:

AmNet Systems: [www.amnet-systems.com](http://www.amnet-systems.com)

Calibre e-book Management:

<http://calibre.kovidgoyal.net/>

Ingram Digital: [www.ingramdigital.com](http://www.ingramdigital.com)

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Follet: <http://ebooks.foollett.com>

Ingram: [www.mylibrary.com](http://www.mylibrary.com)

Net Library: [www.netlibrary.com](http://www.netlibrary.com)

Overdrive: [www.overdrive.com](http://www.overdrive.com)

Powell's: [www.powells.com](http://www.powells.com)

Smashwords: [www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com)

World eBook Library: [www.worldpubliclibrary.org](http://www.worldpubliclibrary.org)

### Research and Statistics:

Book Industry Study Group: [www.bisg.org](http://www.bisg.org)

Independent Book Publishers Association:

[www.ibpa-online.com](http://www.ibpa-online.com)

Int'l Digital Publishing Forum: [www.idpf.org](http://www.idpf.org)

Net Pop Research: [www.netpop.com](http://www.netpop.com)

Society for New Communications Research:

[www.snrcr.org](http://www.snrcr.org)

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watershed sales of the e-book edition, akin to the release of Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet* exclusively as an e-book in 2002. But while the print edition of Brown's novel broke several sales records in early release, e-book sales represented only about 5% of total sales...about the same as other titles available in both printed and electronic form. This is not to suggest that 100,000 e-books sold in less than two weeks (with near-zero production and shipping costs) isn't impressive...but on the other hand, Harry Potter isn't exactly quaking in his boots yet.

Scholarly studies suggest that there are inherent physical/cognitive differences between the way readers "interact" with paper versus a computer screen. They conclude that e-books will be slow to supplant tree-books as a result.

"With the Web, people could access more information more easily than before, but though they used digital means to find and retrieve information, they still preferred to print it out on paper when they wanted to read it," state Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H. R. Harper in *The Myth of the Paperless Office* (MIT Press, 2002).

Why do people embrace paper? "Paper has intrinsic properties that (1) make it easy and enjoyable to work with, (2) help us make sense of information, and (3) are conducive to certain kinds of reading and thinking. They are properties that [our] newer media, for all their wonders, have not yet learned to match," add Sellen and Harper.

This report concludes that while e-book sales grew from \$19 million in 2006 to \$31 million in 2007 (source: IDPF.org) and continued their steep upward trajectory in 2008, at present it appears that e-books still represent only a small percentage of the total U.S. book sales. They probably will not pose a serious threat to tree-books for several years, and in fact may evolve as a separate market—what computer programmers call "an AND not an OR"—in relation to their printed counterparts.

### *Mythprint #2: EPUB format is a cure-all*

The first question that confronts book publishers who want digital distribution is whether to attempt copy protection (also called DRM or "digital rights management"). Among hardcore techies, it's widely agreed that there are *no* bulletproof solutions to

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by Scott Flora

prevent consumers from making pirated copies. Instead, current DRM strategies are more of a *deterrent*. They make it annoying, but not impossible, to make unauthorized copies. For e-books with affordable prices, the annoyance may very well outweigh the value of what is stolen. As a result, current DRM solutions may be up to the task at hand in many cases.

Applying DRM to an e-book greatly complicates the process of e-publishing, as this report will amplify shortly. Yet few book publishers, who increasingly view themselves as guardians of intellectual property, are comfortable with DRM-free e-books today. *Why would readers pay for something they can get for free?* they ask, echoing the question posed about online music downloading a decade ago. iTunes solved the problem for musicians, by offering legal downloads for 99 cents. But in today's world, there is not (yet) a perfect analog to iTunes for e-books.

An early effort is Smashwords.com, where a writer or publisher can convert a Word or RTF document to all leading e-book formats for free. Then they can sell their e-books at Smashwords (and soon at major e-book sites like Fictionwise.com) while retaining up to 85% of revenues. But the resulting output may not have a polished appearance or sophisticated functionality, and lacks DRM of any kind, at least for now.

If a book publisher opts for DRM, life gets more complicated. In recent years, many book publishers heard that they needed only to convert print production files (such as PDF files) to EPUB format, in order to achieve a kind of "one-stop shopping" approach to e-publishing. EPUB files, they thought, would flawlessly re-convert to other formats for the Sony e-Reader, the Palm Pilot, Microsoft Reader, etc. Unfortunately, in 2009 this is simply not yet reality.

Even with a polished EPUB file, many additional adjustments are often necessary to insure good performance on various reading devices, even before DRM is applied.

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The most obvious example is that Amazon's Kindle requires at least one additional conversion to MOBI format. To sell DRM-enabled e-books for the iPhone and iPod Touch, a PDB format file may be required. Next, after the body of the book has been converted, copy protection is finally applied.

Book publishers today are also discovering that the "first draft" of any file conversion, including the initial conversion to EPUB, is rarely perfect. This is especially true for books that contain pictures, graphs, charts, or other complex design elements.

Some argue, perhaps with (pun intended) justification, that e-books need not rival the appearance of their printed counterparts, except of course for coffee table books and others that center on images more than text. In Japan, five of the top ten bestsellers of 2007 were so-called "cell-phone novels" that utterly disregarded traditional standards of writing and graphic design—yet sold millions of copies. Just the same, many book publishers getting started in e-publishing find that multiple drafts of each file format are needed, in order to achieve a minimum professional standard.

To make things difficult in business terms as well as technical ones, there is a scarcity of services that provide both conversion and distribution of protected files. For example, a book publisher who wants to target millions of users of the iPhone and iPod Touch may find only one viable conversion+DRM option without contracting directly with the e-bookseller. This limits the publisher's choices of terms, distribution channels, and other important business decisions.

For the present, if a book publisher wants to sell copy-protected e-books through major outlets, it must be prepared to navigate both technical and business challenges in an ever-shifting landscape. ■

Read Part II next month for insights on the final two e-book "mythprints," including recent announcements of promises to simplify e-book creation and distribution.

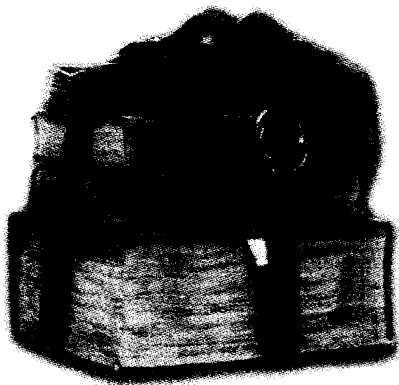
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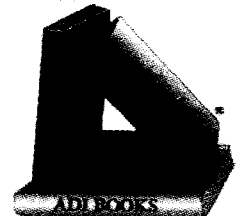
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